Incised Figures from the Top of a Lid Found on Samui Island, Thailand

TOM HARRISSON

If it were not for the 'subject matter' (in so far as there is one) of these designs (Wilhelm G. Solheim II, Further relationships of the Sa-huỳnh-Kalanay pottery tradition, *AP* VIII 1; 196–210; 200–05 and Pl. I *b-c*, II) they would be quite acceptable as having been drawn by Kenyahs, Kayans or most other inland peoples of Borneo. The figures with four trunk-like protruberances from the head can be almost exactly matched with the common pictorial themes in long-house wall painting, bead work, designs on shields, etc., especially in the Baram and Baloi Rivers of Sarawak and the Batang Kayan in Kalimantan.

This idea of extensions curving out from the head is a fundamental one in Dayak thinking and art expression. Corresponding ideas are found, at one end of the scale, in the use of double-spouted vessels placed with human skulls in the Niah Caves. They date back to at least 1500 B.C. At the other end of the scale is the use of hornbill casques and feathers, and the feeling of the hornbill as a sort of overlord, a spatial extension of the human mind (see the writer's discussion in B. E. Smythies, *The Birds of Borneo,* 1960, special chapter).

Spanning a period of more than 3,000 years are the art expressions of the same theme captured in bronze. The parallel between the Dongson drumbird dancers and, for instance, some of the Ngadju art of southern Kalimantan, has been drawn by Goulebew and his successors in this field. Recently the same treatment was found in the hematite wall paintings of the Niah Caves, probably datable to approximately A. D. 700 to 1000. Because it was first identified at Dongson, this sort of symbolism has been too frequently attributed to Indo-China. Had research taken another course, this sort of thinking might well be called Bornean, or even Niahian. We see how specialized and localized it can become within the general pattern with the very fine bronze hornbill figure from central Borneo that I described and illustrated in detail in 1964 (*Artibus Asiae* XXXVI, 1: 157–71).

Here we are dealing with the expression of a very important and basic attitude in the living world, one which was once dominant all over the area. It has survived in its fullest form only in interior Borneo and a few remote parts of the Indonesian archipelago. It is widely found elsewhere, but only as it has been fossilized in imperishable material, notably bronze. The find at Samui Island is, so far as I know, unique in its treatment of earthenware. Whether

this implies the autochthonous development of an ancient theme or that this object is a relic of cross-water traffic between people with common interests, is uncertain. Confirmation of either implication awaits the discovery of other pieces in archaeological contexts. I would be inclined toward the former view.

Finally, the elephant occupies a prominent place in the designs. But I would emphasize that the particular animal or object represented is not necessarily of prime importance. Anything, from a rhinoceros to a scorpion, can be expressed in the same way. For instance, in 1932 the Baram Kenyahs tattooed my left arm with a design that is very similar in treatment; there it represents a scorpion. In 1945 I was dropped by parachute into the Kelabit uplands, whose people have no contact with the Kenyahs. But there the tattoo was immediately recognized as indigenous, identifying me as an old Borneo hand! The Kelabits considered it a *dog*. In travels throughout the island since, different peoples have identified it as a crocodile, a sambhur deer and a rattan vine bud! Difficult as this conception may be to Western minds, it is essential for interpreting and understanding this sort of art form in South-East Asia. Attempts to minutely classify or to exactly identify design and symbolism continue to be far too popular, almost invariably sterile and often definitely misleading.